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IN QUEST OF THE THIRD LEARNING SPACE

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Abstract

The turning point for the appreciation of high-quality bilingual education occurred when international student mobility assumed its actual content and Russian students were permitted to enroll in foreign universities, provided that they show appropriate training both in terms of vocational subjects and the language of the host country. Creation and support of a full-fledged foreign language communication, including joint projects or double degree programmes, prompt lecturers to search after the most effective learner-teacher environment that combines professional education with foreign language acquisition. This qualitative study focuses on the paradigm shift towards English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the bilingual classroom, preconditioned by the formation of a hybrid culture identity. It is a follow-up to our previous research (213 students and 23 English language teachers of the Ural Federal University (URFU), Russia) into teachers' understanding of their roles as carriers of a foreign culture and learners' awareness of the amount of cultural intelligence they need to succeed in the highly competitive global job market. The results of that on-line survey contributed to a subsequent analysis of the learning community as the 'third space' (Bhabha, 2012), and put a number of questions to the teaching staff, such as whether academic bilinguals can be considered well-defined bicultural people, and at what stage of making up a bilingual the identification with the third space manifests itself. The findings of the recent semi-structured interview of the EMI teachers (N=12) would necessitate further research including descriptive case studies of some national universities.

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Keywords: EMI classroom, bicultural learner, third space.



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1. Introduction

The idea of multiculturalism as a way of organizing a democratic political community, prevailing in Europe and the United States, has been criticized on the same grounds that previously earned praise (Malik, 2015). Today, Europe's mix of cultures and global information space do not fit into the theories of G. Hofstede and F. Trompenaars built on the idea that university graduates will be working mainly with representatives of one culture. In the globalized world communication takes place in the multicultural, lingua franca speaking environment, hence people engage in the multiple cultural contexts and simultaneously are or become carriers of hybrid cultural identity. The value and success of such communication in global English depend not so much on the language proficiency, but on the ability to interact and "search after and discover meanings" (Kolesnikova, 2013).

The large-scale exposure of modern people to the English language calls for revising the EFL (English as a foreign language) paradigm, as intercultural communication approaches fail to provide adequate tools for successful and effective communication in the hybrid milieu.

Since the chance of transition from one culture to another for current foreign language learners is higher compared with previous generations, the social scientists initiated discussions on deliberate or unintentional formation of a "third culture" which incorporates the cultural principles of the home country and some strata of the host culture. The new generation of learners or "third culture kids" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2010) are notable for their more open-minded attitudes towards the world and acceptance of others' opinions. However, this often entails a problematic and more sensitive perception of reality than that of monocultural individuals' and sometimes leads to rejection of certain cultural values and attitudes encountered in other cultures. Then the differences in views about what is good and what is bad, and what is true and what is not true, may be internalized through a "third space" (Bhabha, 2012), which implies awareness of the incommensurability of values.

The growth of student exchange and export of education throughout the world has affected Russian higher education not long ago with the introduction of the National Programme on Development of Education 2013-2020, and consequently the mechanisms of adaptation to different cultural contexts and effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds and levels of language proficiency are insufficiently dealt with by the Russian researchers. Traditionally, the responsibility for constructing a foreign communication environment lay on the teachers of foreign languages who proceeded with creating a bilingual communicative space under the new perspective, but mainly with conventional teaching techniques. However, the global experience of using a foreign language as a teaching tool (Taguchi, 2014; Chapple, 2015; Dearden, 2015; Seitzhanova et al., 2015; Borg, 2016) gives an opportunity to reflect on the positive outcomes accumulated in the teaching methodology and compare with regional and local features of the new third space formation. This research aims to review the situation with the changing learning paradigm at the Ural Federal University, Russia.

2. Problem Statement

The Ural Federal University (URFU) is one of the leading Russian universities and the 5-100 Project participants, aiming at achieving competitive position in the global education market and hence

raising its internationalization indicators by recruiting over 300 international students annually. The interim progress is evident in the cohort of 2,000 undergraduates and graduates from 80 countries on campus at present. Development of programmes and modules taught through English, especially for master's degrees, constitutes a high priority in the university language policy. Home students and university researchers are granted academic mobility programmes and visit European and Asian universities to join in various international conferences, dual-diploma courses and research schemes. At present, URFU is ranked among the top universities in the world according to 650 QS World University Ranking and takes place among 78 BRICS universities (QS World University Rankings: BRICS).

To increase its attractiveness as a high quality educational space and remain abreast of the teaching innovations, URFU like many Russian universities has announced the introduction of EFL in the environment of academic instruction. Long before the commencement of internationalization of the Russian higher education, the national educational context was replenished with the globally used CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) method. The obvious advantages of the method were highlighted in the literature (Coyle et al., 2010; Ball et al., 2015; Polenova, 2015) with the focus on all the four components: content, cognition, communication, and culture. The students were believed to grasp the academic content and enrich professional terminology. Moreover, the CLIL's undoubted advantage was also in cost and time saving, as language integration in the subject context of the secondary and higher schools' curricula enabled the hours release traditionally assigned to the General English, Academic English or English for Specific Purposes modules. However, the CLIL approach requires clarification on the language and content ratio, otherwise there emerges a predominance of one over the other. In addition, there was a lack of students' motivation (what for?) and teachers' good will (why should I?) to introduce CLIL instruction. In general, unlike the beneficial implications of the CLIL pedagogy in the multilingual European context, Russia seems unlikely to be a fertile ground for that kind of language practice.

The turn for commercialization of education as a global trend necessitated devising more efficient language teaching methods to be in line with the world pedagogic practices. High on the agenda today is the institutionalization of the EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) method resembling CLIL in some ways, though essentially different. Since EMI is a relatively new concept in Russia and its vital power is in prospect, we foresee both enthusiasm and rejection on the part of all the stakeholders. Nevertheless, its potential to give access to cultural diversity in the multilingual environment seems particularly promising.

Despite the wide-scale application of EMI in many European contexts (Dearden, 2015; Dearden & Macaro, 2016), Russian teachers and lecturers for the most part interpret the tool as a heterogeneous product of commercializing higher education that is being imposed on from above, therefore they are concerned about the need for its wide application, voice uncertainty about its vitality and bring up the issue of local specifics. In addition, some research describes a conflict communication and ambiguity in the undergraduates' intergroup relations (Leontyeva & Chaychenko, 2016).

3. Research Questions

If we take a dare and acknowledge the inevitability of teaching English as a transformed tool in the multilingual context of URFU, then we should highlight the following issues: 1) if national cultural

values are on the agenda of teaching English, then can a bilingual person be defined as a bicultural learner? and 2) does identification with a new language community take place and at what stage of becoming a bilingual?

4. Purpose of the Study

The awareness of meeting the challenge has grown from the analysis of the previous survey research carried out among 213 graduates and postgraduates who took the EFL class in the culturally mixed groups. In addition, the EFL teachers working in these heterogeneous settings were interviewed. Most of the students demonstrated willingness to learn about another culture, but failed to specify what cultural meanings they should adopt. They assigned guilt for the ignorance and stereotypical understanding of the importance of cultural values on the teachers, who, in their view, insufficiently attend to these issues. Likewise, the teachers had confidence in the importance of harmonious learning of language and culture, but showed inability to identify themselves as bicultural persons.

These eloquent indications disclosed the inadequacy of the current teacher training model, as 'architects of learning spaces' need to be adapted to the changing context of cultural diversity while developing cultural intelligence in addition to language and communicative competences. Exposure to another culture is much less obvious for EMI teachers who used to perceive their mission as merely knowledge givers. For this reason, an assessment of such new ability as intercultural communicative competence is of high interest and will set a benchmark for EMI practitioners, although no standardized methods can be applied to cultural awareness identification. Consequently, the achievement of individual's psychological well-being can be regarded as the only possible criterion (Downie et al., 2004).

5. Research Methods

To conduct a research into the paradigm shift towards English Medium Instruction in the bilingual classrooms we surveyed twelve EMI lecturers currently teaching some academic modules (the humanities) to the mixed master's degree groups (international and Russian students). All the respondents met the standard language requirements (B2 and upper) set by the departments and the URFU administration as a prerequisite for their recruitment. Our choice of the lecturers was made on the ground of their willingness to share concern about emotional and cognitive uncertainty they experienced teaching in the EMI classrooms. But the focus of the semi-structured interview was placed on their awareness of the instrumental character of the EMI tool in creating bicultural learners simultaneously with knowledge acquisition. We expected to receive answers to the following questions:

1. In your opinion, can the EMI method provide a sufficient place for learning another culture?
2. How can you influence this cultural acquisition provided that you have to meet the students' requirements in the academic content?
3. What might signal your students' transformation into careers of two cultures?
4. Are you aware of different sources your students can fill their cultural needs from?
5. Do you believe it's your task to help them grow both mentally and culturally?
6. What should be done to make your classroom a better place?

7. Are you happy with what you are doing and planning to do?

6. Findings

Russian language was the medium of the interview. This was done for the purpose of creating a confidential atmosphere and emotional connection that facilitates a direct expression of one's subjective experience.

Analyzing the data obtained during the open-ended questioning we found that all the respondents admitted that EMI classroom can serve as a platform for learners' bicultural development, but they failed to define at what stage. Their obscure explanations mainly illustrated the deep-rooted notions about unavoidable paradigm of developing intercultural competence in learners through authentic English texts and web sites, as two of the respondents commented:

(1) *"As for me, I don't see why cultural competence should be given a particular attention in my class. First of all, I must give my students subject knowledge".*

(2) *"These 'third culture kids' are able to operate with different (cultural) information sources better than I do".*

One respondent stressed the fact that postgraduates should strive for autonomous learning and take personal responsibility for their bilingual and bicultural transformation:

(3) *"I keep to the planned lecture format and my workload allows little time even for my research. It was their (students') choice and let them reap a harvest".*

Six respondents criticized the learning space for being "insufficiently arranged", and eight people attributed the blame to the university administration. These two observations are quite revealing:

(4) *"I would think twice next time I am offered any EMI class".*

(5) *"As usual, they (the department) are looking for extra gains. There are more questions in EMI than answers".*

However, three people accepted personal responsibility for developing a "third space" in the EMI classroom:

(6) *"I clearly remember my language learning experience and the first time I visited one international conference. It was a complete disaster when I failed to communicate when my foreign colleagues addressed me in the lobby".*

(7) *"Yes, I'd rather agree we (teaching staff) should represent a model of constant self-transformation in terms of academic development and personal and cultural adaptation to the changing classroom context".*

(8) *"I know that what I am planning to do in my classroom should be in line with my students' needs".*

We acknowledge that this sampling lacks conformity with the standard procedure of a qualitative research, but this express method makes it possible to arrange a wider research into the change of mindset in the EMI context before the situation would become catastrophic. The findings have shown a latent threat, as one person was skeptical about her teaching efforts:

(9) *“I’m afraid this experience will undermine my authority. Sometimes I am at a loss as to how I can meet the requirements; sometimes I can’t manage this ill-matched group. I was much happier with my classes in Russian”.*

7. Discussion

To go with the progressive evolution of the global community, with its recognition that diversity of cultures is not an order of the day, but an inexorable future, we should find compatible features with different from us individuals, realizing that a period of adjustment to a certain culture may be very short. This implies that the assessment of one’s views and preferences against an alien identity requires significant time that people usually lack. In addition, the very understanding of the cultural values does not ensure the right projection of interpersonal interaction. In these circumstances, a more appropriate tool for intercultural interaction is a cultural intelligence (CQ) paradigm. To a certain extent, the theory of cultural intelligence contests approaches of intercultural communication as they entail the perpetuation of stereotypes about other cultures. Admitting a certain inevitability of stereotypes and even a necessity of them, the cultural intelligence theorists argue that people with a developed cultural intellect show, above all, the ability to be aware of the occurrence of stereotypes, i.e. they have skills of metacognition – thinking about thinking. Such people know how their cultural attitudes emerge and take shape and are able to critically evaluate and transform them.

Cultural intelligence implies three fundamental elements: “metacognition and cognition (thinking, learning, and strategizing); motivation (efficacy and confidence, persistence, value congruence and affect for the new culture); and behavior (social mimicry and behavioral repertoire)” (Earley & Peterson, 2004). People with a high CQ can interpret the behavior of people of different cultures in the context of this behavior, and they are enough motivated to overcome misunderstanding and discomfort from misinterpretation of another culture’s signs. Moreover, they are able to adjust their behaviour in line with the way they perceived the signs of the foreign culture. As a rule, such individuals demonstrate their efficacy in the context of cultural diversity.

During the transition to a post-standardized educational paradigm, a search for new learning communities has moved to the forefront, as new educational and cultural constructs are rather dynamic than fixed and none of the stakeholders has the prerogative to interpret and introduce them. We share some researchers’ views (Baltzersen, 2013) that the arrangement of conditions for a successful interaction in the mixed environment, such as colleges and universities, is impossible without purposeful cultivating of metacommunication as a pledge of efficient communication. Metacommunication allows a working alliance between teacher and students that promotes dialogue to examine expectations of both sides from the learning process, objectives and learning strategies, academic content, teacher-learner relationship and time frames.

According to Fullan (1995), a new learning community calls for radical change in the culture of educational institutions and needs redesign of teacher education. The staff members accept the striving for continuous improvement in different ways, but always in the context of a particular school or university. This proves that organizational decisions aimed at teachers’ professional development, curriculum changes and other management actions should be linked to the unique conditions and environment,

learners' individual characteristics and other specifics of the educational place. The opposite example is given in the description of EMI settings in several cultures (Hsuan-Fu et al., 2015; Macaro et al., 2016). The success of the transformed learning space presupposes obligatory engagement of all the stakeholders, both the directly concerned and the community of experts, parents and employers, in managerial decision making.

Evidently, a teacher in the changing environment is not only a professional capable of applying varied teaching methods proceeding from learners' needs, but also a person who accepts the need for continuous self-perfection and self-evaluation (Fullan, 1995), that is to say, one who acts with the awareness of a bilingual and bicultural personality.

Like many people at the crossroads of life or career, the EMI lecturers we interviewed were in need of meaningful content. The uncertainty of the EMI settings in URFU increases the infeasibility of control over the situation and one's actions. The alienation from the cultural mix of their classrooms, exposed by nine persons, evidences the urgent necessity of developing constructs to use to distinguish the aspects of the 'third space' and themselves. From this new perspective, the demands laid on developing an "intercultural mindset" (Hammer, 2009) can be met by introducing a new conceptual framework for EMI teacher training at URFU, including language repertoire growth and formation of cultural intelligence and metacognition as its critical aspect (Earley & Peterson, 2004). Thus, the EMI teachers armed with the adaptive strategies can take a proactive approach to potential cultural dilemmas and gain confidence in self-efficacy.

8. Conclusion

Any undertaking demands some efforts to work its way through. The EMI phenomenon in the URFU context can't be neglected, since the emerging "third learning space" has already made itself known and calls for careful consideration and revision of the traditional teaching methods and human approaches. The growth of competence models has given rise to synergetics of cognition and appearance of a more generic intercultural competence, indicating a high level of individual acculturation and expansion of communicative horizons.

Willingness to establish a productive academic setting for the bicultural learner is based, primarily, on the awareness of individuals' cultural capital and critical view of self-identification. This requires well-developed emotional intelligence and cognitive control, as well as active mindfulness. All the educational stakeholders should recognize a learning environment as a space for intercultural communication between carriers of individual cultures.

The research findings have given a stimulus to a further analysis of EMI practices in the classrooms including descriptive case studies of some national universities.

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